

# War Ends Hoodoo About Labor for Women

## Land Army's Growth Includes All Classes and Brings Out the Feminine Best by Return to Nature

By AGNES C. LAUT.

**B**Y women back-to-the-landers I do not mean women land owners who operate their own acres, as your ancestors and my ancestors did, whether you come from the East or the West.

The tradition has pretty nearly died out in the East, but we know full well and bless their memories for it that our grandmothers' mothers stood shoulder to shoulder with our pioneer ancestors of New England, where a tiny cabin lay in a lovely bush lot, with a deep set window casement as likely to reflect the passing shadow of a timber wolf as of a raiding Indian. That was only a little over a hundred years ago. It was only fifty years ago that Southern women noted for their gentle birth did still more valiant work as back-to-the-landers from Virginia and Georgia to Missouri and Texas.

Did you ever stop to think who it was reorganized plantation life during the civil war? The men and boys were wounded or in the army. The slaves had been freed. Who fed the South and ran the farms? The Southern woman. She it was who held the negro by personal loyalty, assigned to each colored family a mule, a hog, chickens and a cabin and kept the Southern farm going to feed the South.

### Women Busy at All Times.

And we don't need to go back to civil war times to find the woman back-to-the-landers in the West. Came a blizzard or a prairie fire, and I have seen English girls, keeping house for some younger son of a titled family, saddle a bronco and ride out to gather the fire fighters or round the cattle into shelter from a coming storm with as little thought of doing something unusual as a game of tennis would cause.

I don't mean this class at all, and I confess I don't know why we moderns have ever come to regard these things as unusual. I mean the Woman's Land Army movement now running through the East and the middle West like a prairie fire. Undoubtedly it was the word "Army" that took the curse off and lifted the social taboo from the honor of hard work, for if you had prophesied even five years ago when everybody who was anybody was tango teeing and toeing tango that the very same girls would to-day be out in khaki hoeing spuds instead of toting two steps or pruning trees and picking apples instead of trimming bachelors and playing with a forbidden apple somewhat famous in the Garden of Eden, you would have been set down as a curious freak to be caged and classified.

And yet they are doing it. Everybody's doing it, doing it, doing it—girls from the trade schools, college girls, deans, dons, grads and undergrads, marrieds and singles, titled women in England, bridge fiends, hunt clubettes, young and old. Sometimes they wear blue overalls, sometimes khaki skirts, sometimes riding trousers.

### Epidemic of Happiness.

Some pick berries. Some hoe spuds. Some ride gloriously happy, like kids out of school, on a horse rake in a hay field. Some chuck calves under the chin, where they used to chuck another kind of vealy chin. Some go in for dairying and some for poultry, but the point is there is a voluntary enlistment of women for outdoor work going over the world in an epidemic—the happiest, wholesomest epidemic for many a day.

Vassar girls run a farm of 740 acres. That for the Hudson River of millionaire estates. Vancouver girls to the number of 1,500 handled fruit farms last year. That for the Pacific coast, and over in England in 1917 more than 250,000 women ran farms straight through the year, and the number is estimated at half a million for this year.

And undoubtedly war has taken the social taboo off hard labor. You have to do something to be somebody to-day—and do it hard. You have to leave each day the richer by a job done, and as food



Three of the battalion of the Women's Land Army at Farmingdale, L. I., engaged in greenhouse work.

is primarily a woman's job and has been since time began and warriors went forth to raid, it isn't surprising that in this, the greatest of all world wars, women and girls should have eagerly enlisted in this primeval job of feeding and weeding and nourishing the race.

The funny part of it is only three years ago we had all grown so very genteel—I hate and loathe the word! so delicate as well as delicatessen—when you get a woman to a certain register of the dainty you can pretty nearly bet on the food's being bought—that we had proved woman shouldn't do it. We had proved woman couldn't do it. We were offered proof positive she wouldn't do it—and here she is doing it, doing it, doing it, with more zest than she ever danced the tango.

Why, only four years ago the Agricultural Department of the United States issued half a dozen booklets retelling the terrible drudgeries, the nerve shattering loneliness of the farm woman's lot. (To be a perfectly true picture each page of that tale of lamentations should have had a counter story of the loneliness of life in a flat, of being one in a crowd day in and day out, week in and week out, year in and year out, without ever meeting a friendly face or knowing a soul who cares whether you live or die). The booklets practically painted the farm woman as hired man and hired girl without any wages, and here is an army of fools rushing out to embrace that drudgery with both hands!

### Never Know What They'll Do.

Truly the vealy young theorists who gathered up those tales of woe now know, if they didn't before, that there is only one thing deadly certain about a woman, and that is you never do know what she will do next.

We may say it was the war that opened the way for woman out of their prison house of convention, out to life and living in the open, but weren't they pressing against the bars to escape to the open fields before the war? What was the meaning of all the vacation camps to get girls out under tent roof and star roof if only for a few weeks each summer? What was the significance of the growing fad of out of door sports for women?

Because a girl lived down below Eighth street on the East Side, or because a woman wore the solemn air of a college president up on the West Side, it didn't make her long any the less to saturate herself in sunlight and ozone. Sandal scented tapestries and myrrh and cassia—yes, I know the poets rave about them, but there is a smell in the wild woods in May, and in the rose gardens in June, and in the hay fields in July, and in the wheat and tasseled corn fields in August, and in the ripening orchards in September, to set your blood hopping with a rhythm that pulses back to the beginning of time.

We knew when those smells came that we were a caged in, close housed civilization, and we cursed our lot. The war has opened the doors, but a world of women were pressing against the bars.

Right here as I write a catbird is fid-

dling the most ridiculous happy tunes. A robin is bursting his throat telling his wife what a good world it is, and the little gray green warblers that come from the South on certain days in May sure as the clock goes round are preening feathers and cheeping to be off on nesting business up on Hudson Bay. Yes, we were a caged in lot, holding 90 per cent. of ourselves quiescent beneath a solemn deadline of dreadful, respectable, stupid propriety, but we never will be again for the war has opened the door.

It has always been perfectly proper to ride, to motor, to swim, to play games out of doors, but not to work, but now the war has changed all that. We can go out and work as an "Army" and take pay for it, whether we are college presidents or little sweatshop girls, and we can do it and not be socially damned. If the war lasts long we may even win stars and medals and army rank doing it—brown as berries with our sleeves rolled up and perhaps muddy hands and dusty boots.

### All Shoddy Going Out.

Shoddy is going out of more than wool. It is going out of morals and manners and completely out of the economic world. Shoddy is going, going, gone! in manners, morals and the business world. Shoddy morals and tawdry manners don't win battles, and we're all getting down to the real.

I know women who only three years ago brought themselves under suspicion of being queer, if not off color, by simply applying for outdoor jobs as gardeners, though I have personally had a woman gardener now for more than three years. I know a Cornell woman graduate who was unceremoniously ordered to "get out of here—we don't want your kind," when she applied to a big rose and seed firm for work in its gardens. She never will be told so again. That firm employed twenty-two women and girls last year.

Is it a freak? Is it a fad? Will it last?

Though I have been an outdoor person all my life and have camped in half the mountain passes in the Rockies and ridden through the Western wheat fields when there were no barbed wire fences to stop you, I thought this whole Woman's Land Army movement in America was a freak and a fad till I went out and saw for myself. No use retailing what England and France have done. The world knows that and ascribes it to the stress of near war. The thing is, what is happening right here in America?

The movement seemed to break simultaneously in three different ways. Down in Washington the Women's Committee of the Council of National Defence heard from more than 100,000 women who volunteered to do war work at outdoor jobs in the summer of 1917. The committee was utterly stumped. It didn't know what to do with those volunteers. Food was needed, yes, but how to put these volunteers "over the top."

Up in New York the Mayor's Committee of Women on National Defence had

## Fine Examples of Democracy Are the Farm Camps and Improved Health Is Greatest Blessing

the same problem—food needed and volunteers eager to work producing food, but never a farmer who would take a present of such outdoor help. Then there were the countless school garden movements, excellent in themselves and beautiful to see, but destined to spade up more gardens than were ever harvested and about as effective as a factor in world food production as a child's pebble would be as a breakwater against the sea.

But if all these volunteers could be utilized in real work the woman's suffrage organizations were for it. The National League for Women's Service was for it. All the patriotic leagues were for it, but here were the farmers, desperate for help, spurning the volunteers! Why? Because an untrained worker in the fields is about as satisfactory on the farm as a greenhorn running a sixty horse-power motor would be on Broadway in the rush hour.

### Easily Do Much Damage.

Greenhorns can spoil a \$150 cow in two bad milkings. They can kill a calf in one wrong feeding. They can ruin a horse by watering just once at the wrong time. They can hoe up good plants and carefully leave all weeds, not to mention breakage of machinery and a casualty list from blunders.

Besides farm help in America is in a very curious stage of transition. It is neither fish, flesh nor good red herring. The old type, the neighbor's son leaving the job, has gone off the map. He is running his own farm or has gone to town. In his place have come two types, neither yet entirely satisfactory—the cheap riffraff ne'er do well, the derelict of the hard cider habit, who will not outlast much more than this generation, and the college trained man, who may be a gold brick if he has had no experience and who, if he has had experience, will be very high priced.

Where and how were women hired on such farms to be housed? Farmers were chary of the whole business. They are yet.

So keeping very quiet about it till it could see how the plan would work out a committee took an old house on the Harlem line, furnished in the cheapest, most inexpensive way with cot beds, and with the assistance of deans and instructors opened a farm camp, or what is now known as a farm unit. This would try the scheme out tentatively while girls were on vacations. Applicants were taken as they came, trade union girls, college graduates, office women, teachers, chauffeurs, secretaries, singers, governesses, in age from 16 to 45, to the number of 171 for the whole season.

### Had Little Ground to Work.

Unfortunately the Mount Kisco unit had very little ground to work, but in this small garden the workers were tested out and trained in squads of a dozen under a captain. About Mount Kisco are many fine estates. Notice was sent to the managers of the estates when the squads were ready to try out real work.

At first there was great reluctance to try this form of labor, but soon the report spread that the workers were making good and more calls came for the Land Army than there were hands to go out. The girls began at gardening, working up to orchard fruits, greenhouse tasks and finally to almost every variety of farm work—hoeing, haying, silo filling, apple picking, apple packing.

Ninety-nine farms employed the Woman's Land Army. Motor buses took the workers to and from the fields on the various estates. The housing problem was solved by keeping the camp at the central house.

After trying out two or three financial schemes it was finally found best to pay the girls a straight \$15 a month. The farmers were charged \$2 a day for an eight hour day, the proceeds coming back to defray the cost of the camp and the girls' wages and maintenance. There were only two cases of riffraff male help on one of the estates making overtures that might have been regarded as fresh